

Toward Multiple Pathways to Graduation in Michigan – With Cities as a Partner

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Chairman Melton and members of the Committee, it's a pleasure to join you today from Washington, DC, where I am a Senior Fellow at the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, focused on re-engaging disconnected youth. I look forward to introducing several ideas about how cities can play a powerful role as part of local collaboratives seeking to offer a better range of high school options for Michigan's students – and thereby to prepare young people for further learning, work, and civic and family life. My remarks will also draw significantly on experience working with a dynamic group of school innovators, the Alternative High School Initiative. I'll close with a few suggestions about possible new horizons for state policy, and look forward to an engaged conversation with you.

NLC's Youth, Education and Families Institute is a special "action tank" that helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of children, youth, and families in their communities. We do so by providing city leaders with tools, publications, and technical assistance, usually with support from major national foundations including Michigan's own Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. We also maintain peer learning networks of city leaders and staff members, and serve as a topical resource for Michigan Municipal League and state leagues in 48 other states. For the past several months, at the request of several far-sighted mayors, we have supported the development of the Mayor's Action Challenge. Through this process, 105 Mayors of cities large and small – including George Heartwell of Grand Rapids and Brenda Lawrence of Southfield -- have identified specific goals for bettering the lives of children and youth. Extensive resources are available through the Institute's website, www.nlc.org/iyef, and you may find information on the Mayor's Action Challenge at www.mayorsforkids.org/.

In its first nine years of operation, the Institute has accumulated substantial expertise in the education and afterschool realm. Under the leadership of Institute director Clifford Johnson and education program director Audrey Hutchinson, we have extensively documented and described the forms of municipal leadership in education. One particular focus area has been municipal leadership for expanding options and alternatives for high school. Related to that, we have led policy development and framing efforts for the Alternative High School Initiative, an effort launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2003 to spread high-quality alternative high schools through 12 youth development organizations. We also support state afterschool networks, including Michigan's. Our considered viewpoint on municipal leadership in education is that *municipal leaders can play key roles in contributing to policies and programs for K-12 education and afterschool initiatives, even if the leaders have no formal or direct authority over local school districts and service providers.*

For instance, by working with a number of cities around the country, we identified five ways for municipal leaders to promote high school completion, as follows:

- ⇒ Use the *bully pulpit* to highlight dropout rates and engage the public
- ⇒ Use *leadership roles* to highlight school and student success

- ⇒ *Convene* school, college and university leaders to seek better alignment
- ⇒ *Implement or update* city policies and programs for zoning, building space, etc.
- ⇒ *Promote and ensure resources* to support options – especially wraparound services

Some of the statistical context for our work on municipal leadership in education, and to re-engage disconnected youth, may be familiar to you. The scope and scale of dropout and disconnection issues are dramatic. Some 3.8 million youth ages 16-24 are neither working, nor in school. Fifty-two percent of youth graduate from high school in the main school systems of the nation's 50 largest cities, making it a "coin toss" 1:1 chance whether an entering student will graduate. In most places, a stark graduation gap shows up between cities and suburbs. A total of one million young people do not graduate on time, each year. And notably for our constituency, disconnected youth are concentrated in cities, and this concentration has short- and long-term effects on the government revenue, government spending, and civic and family participation.

Beyond statistics, it helps to describe the broader national context for what some have termed a "dropout crisis," and for ongoing efforts to reform high schools. The need for change shows up in the continued reliance on the longstanding "factory model" of high schools; high dropout rates; a lack of real world relevance reported by students, parents, teachers, and employers; a weak record of preparing young people to succeed at the postsecondary level; and stark earnings differences depending on educational attainment. Robust responses to these needs include: A renewed emphasis on the "new three Rs" of rigor, relevance, relationships; developing schools that meet students' needs for a similar set of skills suited to college and work; development of community schools which focus on more than education alone; and development of a broader portfolio of choices for students and parents.

Increasingly, Mayors understand what Governor Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellent Education calls the challenge for each state and the nation: Three out of every ten students do not graduate from high school; about a third who graduate are not college- and work-ready. A thorough analysis municipal leaders that early choices about educational attainment have long-term consequences for city – and state -- spending on public benefits, law enforcement, and criminal justice, as well as for government revenues, neighborhood and family stability, and human capital development. The short version of the economic impact on the individual of dropping out of school is that he or she will, on average, earn less than half the income of a college graduate. Researchers looked at the long-term impact of those lower average earnings in Massachusetts, and calculated a lifetime earning differential of nearly \$350,000.

With these concerns in mind, municipal leaders, researchers, and policy analysts have developed a list of what every city needs to put in place to tackle the dropout issue fully – this list constitutes a point of reference for policymakers at the state level as well. Elements of the list, several of which I'll talk more about, include:

- Understanding of the issue as a community problem;
- Early warning systems;
- Efforts to transform struggling high schools;
- Integration of education & other data systems;
- Means to reflect, re-tool, innovate across systems;

- Means to engage parents and stakeholders, to set high common aspirations – prepared for college, career, life; and a
- Flexible portfolio of quality options offering rigor, relevance, relationships, and future focus.

For instance, the Greater Louisville Project, working closely with the city and school district, developed a diagram to depict the undesirably low output of the local human capital “pipeline.” Louisville found that only 25% of children make it through to achieve the postsecondary credential needed for success in today’s labor market, and that very significant numbers of young people fall away from education and training along the way. Such illustrations help underscore the sense that parents, neighborhoods, cities, school districts, and state governments must widely share responsibility for building a stronger, less leaky “pipeline.”

Early warning systems appear high on the list of what every city must develop. The idea here is that well before they drop out, students show academic and non-academic distress signals. These include indicators such as failing course grades, low grade point average, low achievement test scores, grade repetition, lack of credit accumulation, disengagement, becoming over-age for grade level, low attendance, and disciplinary problems. As many strategists have noted, and as several cities and districts take action, schools and their community partners including city government can use these signals to predict who may drop out, to direct a variety of interventions, and ultimately to improve student outcomes.

Transforming struggling high schools is also a priority. In addition or as a complement to the comprehensive “turnaround schools” approach you are considering in the draft substitute for House Bill 4787, two areas to keep in mind include an emphasis on community schools, at which communities may co-locate and better integrate services such as health, afterschool programs, and family supports. In this way, schools can become hubs for strengthening neighborhoods. In directing policy toward transforming schools, it is also timely to focus on the goals of high schools. New or re-framed ways of thinking about this include allowing up to six years to complete high school, focusing on postsecondary access – as Michigan and its cities have done through Promise efforts, aided by any current efforts to education students and parents about their choices and preparation needed – and focusing on readiness for postsecondary success defined as attainment of a degree or credential.

Our work with municipal leaders as well as the Alternative High School Initiative has led to a focus on another item on the “must have” list – a flexible portfolio of high quality options for high school, or what is sometimes referred to as multiple pathways to graduation. By “multiple pathways” I mean a range of choices to meet the needs and learning styles of a range of students. This is somewhat analogous to the comprehensive afterschool offerings that many Michigan cities and towns provide for children, mostly those under high school age – if nothing else, in the sense that no one would expect one size to fit all when it comes to afterschool programs. A well-developed set of multiple pathways schools and programs would include those focused on overage/under credited students; career-technical education and Tech Prep; dual enrollment; dropout recovery; career pathways and academies; and work-learning.

With foundation support for a statewide intermediary organization and with state legislation that calls for a report on progress (AB 2648), ten school districts in California are implementing

multiple pathways programs with a slightly different twist. California's multiple pathways approach emphasizes simultaneous preparation for postsecondary education and a career, based on the observation that the same skills are required for college and the workplace. Within this framework, the California districts are building their multiple pathways systems around 15 high-growth industry sectors. Multiple pathways will show up in many forms -- in what are known as partnership academies, as well as in career academies, regional occupational programs, and soon, in comprehensive high schools.

As Chris Sturgis and colleagues in the Youth Transition Funders Group have observed, a multiple pathways to graduation approach makes sense from a school district perspective. Multiple pathways complements efforts to ensure students are college-ready; re-frames the dropout crisis to focus on students who are "on track" or "off track" to graduation; is best done based on an analysis of local dynamics and statistics; responds to student disengagement; and leads to development of a strategically-managed portfolio of schools and options. The mix of schools and programs will support student transitions to get back on track if they have fallen behind, and will allow rapid recovery options for those who have left school altogether.

Sturgis argues persuasively that districts and their partners can take several steps, and several factors into account, to undergird a multiple pathways approach. Early on, the district and partners can reframe and analyze local dynamics regarding graduation and dropout rates, as well as other factors such as credit accumulation and truancy. Local partnerships do well to recognize that emphasizing academic proficiency alone is not sufficient; and that young people are persistent in their efforts to graduate and should be treated as such; and that helping students obtain GEDs -- if that is a good option in the local labor market -- requires fundamental literacy and numeracy. Notably, in several places where multiple pathways approaches are underway, local partnerships have found that school indicators such as grades and credits serve as better predictors than socio-economic indicators. Districts and their partners need to analyze for leaks in the pipeline, the true size of the problem, local predictive and comprehensive measures, and policy conditions. Information systems may need to be enhanced or refocused to provide a sense of indicators along the continuum, so that multiple pathways can be designed so that students do not slip through the cracks.

The Alternative High School Initiative's Policy Framework provides one method for analyzing policy conditions. The Initiative's Seven Conditions for Large-Scale Success of alternatives lists the following essential areas for attention:

1. Increased college access
2. Need-based, adequacy approach to funding
3. Rigorous, reasonable academic standards and assessments
4. Strong accountability
5. Expanded options for parents and students
6. Open sector, readiness to open alternative high schools
7. Coordination with city and other public agencies and community organizations

To cite one highly relevant example of a thorough policy conditions analysis -- last year, the National Youth Employment Coalition conducted an extensive review of alternative education funding and policy in Michigan, and developed recommendations that speak to several of these

policy conditions, noting that the state could: 1) Facilitate the process of “funds following the student” including to CBOs working in partnership with districts; 2) Provide education funding until students achieve a diploma – at least to age 21; 3) Expand dropout prevention and recovery programs; 4) Consider instituting a weighted funding formula to reflect actual costs in different modes of schooling; 5) Extend greater flexibility regarding alternative programs’ eligibility for state education funds; 6) Support the development of a variety of education options; and 7) encourage districts’ collaboration with other youth-serving systems and community-based organizations. It’s important to note that from the perspective of the National League of Cities and the Alternative High School Initiative, a thorough look at district policies and practices must complement any such analysis of state policy conditions.

Moving on from policy to local dynamics – through a comprehensive analysis, the Chicago Public Schools identified a number of points at which students were in danger of becoming, or were actually off track for timely graduation. For one subset of students, risk factors began to show up in elementary school. Experiences and lack of progress in ninth grade placed another group off track. The largest group fell behind in 10th and 11th grade with little hope of recovery except by special interventions. In response, beginning last year, Chicago implemented a new range of graduation pathways programs and incentives. The district organized a range of programs under each of four categories: prevention, early intervention, credit recovery, and re-enrollment.

Another locality - New York City – developed a multiple pathways portfolio consisting of four overlapping elements, following its own comprehensive analysis. The portfolio consists of “transfer schools” at which overage/under credited students benefit from rapid credit recovery and youth development supports; Young Adult Borough Centers hosted by community-based organizations; and GED programs. Cutting across all three models, the city’s Learning to Work effort provides work and college readiness experiences.

Once they have conducted analyses of their situation and dynamics, cities need not “grow their own” high school alternatives. One option is to consider effective national alternative school and program models. Of the models constituting the Alternative High School Initiative, Big Picture Learning the Street Schools Network already support schools in Michigan. Other models to consider include Communities in Schools’ Performance Learning Centers, which offer dropout recovery and rapid credit accumulation options; Gateway to College, which enrolls dropouts ages 16-20 in campus-based programs to earn joint high school diplomas and college credit; Diploma Plus (now in Indianapolis), which has reinvented the high school experience with competency-based education to include the Foundation, Presentation, Plus phases; EdVisions project-based learning schools; and YouthBuild, which increasingly offers high school diplomas in conjunction with trades training experience.

Regardless of whether a locality decides to consider bringing in national models, in designing high school alternatives, all should ensure the presence of several essential elements of effective alternative high schools identified by the Alternative High School Initiative. (Some observers have noted that these characteristics are desirable in all high schools, not alternatives alone). Distinguishing characteristics include the presence of: Authentic learning, teaching and performance assessment; a personalized school culture; shared leadership and responsibility;

supportive partnerships; and a future focus. Considerably more information about these “distinguishers” is available at the Alternative High School Initiative web site, www.ahsi.org.

All these elements come together to help build out a citywide analysis and plan – and to achieve results. Thanks in part to the multiple pathways alternatives, as well as high school closures and restructuring, New York City has seen its district-wide graduation rate rise from 51 to 61%. In Boston, the Youth Transitions Task Force produced the “Too Big To Be Seen” report, which included an analysis of the social and fiscal consequences of the high dropout rate as well as a gap analysis of alternative seats available versus demand. The Boston Task Force’s efforts have spurred additional research and a successful push for state legislation (S. 2766). Philadelphia simultaneously released its “Unfulfilled Promise” report describing that city’s 8,000 annual dropouts, and launched Project U-Turn. At the two-and-one-half-year mark, Project U Turn and its partners in the school district and Mayor’s office can point to the creation of a district multiple pathways office, strategy and reengagement; the release of a thorough RFP to identify new providers and school models; the establishment of several new accelerated high schools; as well as the recently elected Mayor’s own highly public goals and push to cut the dropout rate in half and double the college attainment rate.

For its own part, the Alternative High School Initiative is pursuing multiple pathways development efforts closely tailored to the local situation in three cities so far. By establishing AHSI Place-Based Partnerships in Indianapolis, Nashville, and Newark, the Initiative is exploring the benefits of rapidly and simultaneously developing a portfolio of new alternative high schools. We have already seen in Indianapolis how clearing policy barriers for one school model can help others as well, and how in general Mayoral and superintendent leadership can pave the way for school development. In the Place-Based Partnership approach, the minimum necessary partners include city government, the school district(s), a local intermediary organization, and one or more local postsecondary institutions. Counties, intermediate units, and state social service agencies may also get engaged. The partners explore and identify new school models that match with the needs and trends among struggling students and dropouts, then set ambitious school launch dates and assign staff to manage school development. Each site locates funds to pay for the additional professional development needed so that school staff become capable of managing the new school model. And, in each site, with city, county, or state help, the partnership and new schools build stronger relationships with providers of the wraparound services students are sure to need.

Today, I want to highlight briefly three major implications for state policy, which arise out of a close look at the multiple pathways approach and recent local piloting. State policy can and should:

- 1) Provide encouragement for local stakeholders to collaborate to provide multiple pathways to graduation. This can take several overlapping forms. Districts, city governments, and other stakeholders should receive encouragement from the state. Goals should include a focus on expanding options for parents and students, as well as replacing what doesn’t work. The state may be able to provide financial or regulatory incentives, as well as regulatory relief as forms of encouragement. And state policy can direct or encourage the involvement of state agencies, particularly those with youth-serving missions, as well.

- 2) Provide support for replication of promising practices. This could include support for localities to take broad approaches by launching and sustaining collaborative. It could also include support for specific approaches, such as the “reengagement centers” several cities including Philadelphia have launched to provide one-stop services for dropouts, and for spreading demonstrably high-quality alternative school models.
- 3) Remove barriers that may exist to spreading strong school models. In other states, for instance, it has been important to release schools from “seat time” requirements in order to permit competency-based education to go forward; to expand age eligibility for per-pupil funding to at least age 21; and to provide authority for bonding or other means of assembling funds to renovate or build new school facilities.

A few recent state policy examples, in addition to those from Massachusetts and California mentioned earlier, are worthy of a close look as to structure and short-term impact.

- Without new legislation, drawing upon discretionary federal workforce development funding, Pennsylvania’s Department of Labor and Industry created the Pennsylvania Youth in Transition program which has funded eight regional partnerships to develop or expand cross-system collaboration for improving outcomes among out-of-school youth and young people aging out of foster care; the Commonwealth also supports Regional Career Education Partnerships to provide basic connecting infrastructure for multiple pathways efforts in all local workforce development areas.
- Through the 2007 legislative session Washington State created the “Building Bridges” effort (HB 1573), a grant program for partnerships of schools, families, and communities to build a comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention and retrieval system. Educational Service Districts, similar in function to Michigan ISDs, work with area Workforce Development Councils to provide technical assistance to local partnerships on collecting and using performance data. (More information available at <http://www.k12.wa.us/BuildingBridges/>).
- In Texas, the School Completion and Success Initiative Council recently completed a thorough review of policy and produced extensive recommendations to the legislature. Simultaneously, the state launched the Collaborative Dropout Reduction Pilot Program (initially slated to run 2008-2010) to support collaboration among local entities to reduce the number of students who drop out of school via research-based intervention services. (More information available at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index3.aspx?id=3505>).

Last but hardly least at present, the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families is closely tracking ways that economic stimulus funds can support multiple pathways development. In a brief available on our website, we point out that the ARRA legislation includes billions in new funding, tax credits, and bonding authority that can be used to develop or expand educational pathways and connections to higher education and the workforce, and to recover dropouts. Whereas many of the funds will go to local school districts, workforce investment boards or other community stakeholders, local officials are well-positioned to work in partnership with these entities to make strategic investments that will have a long-term payoff for the community. Specific economic stimulus funding opportunities relevant for multiple pathways include:

- \$1.2 billion in School Improvement Grants;
- \$650 million in the “Investing in What Works and Innovation” Fund;
- \$25.2 billion in bonding authority for states and districts to issue facility renovation bonds;
- \$50 million in additional YouthBuild grants; and
- \$1.2 billion in Workforce Investment Act funding for youth.

We look forward to working with cities in Michigan and elsewhere to make maximum use of these funds, and we commend for state consideration the opportunities to direct and influence funds in the direction of multiple pathways.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to questions and further discussion, and to serving as a resource going forward.